



Merced Wild & Scenic River Final Comprehensive Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement

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The Merced Wild and Scenic River

The Merced Wild and Scenic River, designated in 1987, includes 122 miles of the Merced River on the western side of the Sierra Nevada in California. The National Park Service (NPS) manages 81 miles of the Merced Wild and Scenic River through Yosemite National Park and the El Portal Administrative Site, including the headwaters and both the Merced River's main stem and the South Fork Merced River. As the Merced River flows outside Yosemite's western boundary, the U.S. Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management manage the next 41 miles of the Merced Wild and Scenic River.

Why a Comprehensive Management Plan?

The Wild and Scenic Rivers Act (WSRA) requires comprehensive planning for all designated rivers to provide for the protection of free-flowing condition, water quality, and the outstandingly remarkable values that make the river eligible for designation. In addition, a comprehensive management plan (and its recommendations on land use and development) must fulfill the specific direction of the 1987 legislation designating the Merced River as a component of the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System. The

Merced Wild and Scenic River Final Comprehensive Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement (*Final Merced River Plan/EIS*) is the National Park Service's response to these requirements.

The *Final Merced River Plan/EIS* will be the guiding document for protecting and enhancing river values and managing use and user capacity within the Merced River corridor for the next 20 years. As such, it evaluates impacts and threats to river values and identifies strategies for protecting and enhancing these values over the long-term. The plan follows and documents planning processes required by the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA), and other legal mandates governing National Park Service decision-making. In accordance with these statutes, it was developed in consultation with members of the public, traditionally associated American Indian tribes and groups, and other key stakeholder groups. The *Final Merced River Plan/EIS* reflects a number of changes—discussed in following sections of this document—that were made in response to comments on the Draft Environmental Impact Statement.

What the Plan Includes

In accordance with WSRA, the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA), and other applicable statutes, the Plan:

- Establishes the boundaries and segment classifications (as wild, scenic, or recreational) of the Merced Wild and Scenic River.
- Establishes a formal process for protection of the river's free-flowing condition in keeping with WSRA Section 7.
- Refines descriptions of the river's outstandingly remarkable values (ORVs), which are the unique, rare, or exemplary river-related characteristics that make the river worthy of inclusion in the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System. In addition to free-flowing condition and water quality, the plan identifies 20 ORVs for the Merced River.
- Documents the condition of river values, including water quality, free-flowing condition, and outstandingly remarkable values (ORVs) and establishes a management program to protect and enhance these values.
- Defines the size and location of lands and facilities (both current and future) needed to provide for public use and enjoyment of the river resource, consistent with the protection and enhancement of river values.
- Establishes a user capacity program that addresses the kinds and amounts of public use that the river corridor can sustain while protecting and enhancing the river's ORVs.
- Evaluates a range of alternatives, assesses the effects of each action alternative on natural and socio-cultural resources, and identifies an "environmentally preferable" alternative.
- Describes consultation and coordination efforts.

Evaluation of Alternatives

As part of the *Final Merced River Plan/EIS*, the National Park Service has evaluated six alternatives (one "no action" alternative and five "action alternatives"). Alternative 1 (No Action) represents a continuation of current management practices and provides a basis from which to compare the action alternatives. Alternatives 2-6 feature a wide range of visitation levels, desired visitor experiences, and restoration objectives based on public feedback received throughout the planning process. Across the alternatives, peak visitation for Yosemite Valley ranges from a low of 13,200 people per day (Alternative 3) to a high of 21,800 people per day (Alternative 6). Alternatives 2 and 3 explored a Yosemite with a smaller development footprint and fewer visitor services, resulting in a more self-reliant visitor

experience. Alternative 4 examined a Yosemite with a smaller number of lodging units and a significant increase in camping opportunities. Alternative 5 (Preferred) proposes essential restoration within 100 feet of the river, moderate increases in camping, and visitation levels seen in recent years. A more thorough description of Alternative 5 (Preferred) and how it has changed in response to public and agency comment is included in the following section. Alternative 6 explored expanding visitor services to support future increases in visitation.

Alternative 5 (Preferred) Overview

Alternative 5 (Preferred) is the "environmentally preferable" alternative for the *Final Merced River Plan/EIS*. Alternative 5 (Preferred) proposes to accommodate peak visitation at a level similar to recent years—approximately 20,100 people per day in East Yosemite Valley. Improvements under this alternative would provide a higher-quality visitor experience with increased camping opportunities, improved traffic circulation, and a diversity of recreation options. Essential riverbank restoration proposed under Alternative 5 (Preferred) would further improve this experience; actions proposed under the plan would enhance the Merced River's unique river values and ensure that they are protected for future generations.

Visitor Experience

Under this plan, future visitors to Yosemite Valley will see marked improvements in circulation, parking availability, and traffic flow. Visitors to Yosemite Village will experience an enhanced "sense of arrival" to the heart of Yosemite Valley, as the primary day-use parking area would be fully integrated with pathways to visitor services, restrooms, and food service. Families will enjoy expanded camping opportunities in East Yosemite Valley, with new walk-in, drive-in, and group camping sites provided at several locations. Recreational activities such as rafting, bicycling, and ice skating will continue, with rental facilities and services provided at locations outside the river corridor. Boaters would be able to float new and challenging river reaches framed by views of El Capitan and Half Dome. The West Valley would retain its overall natural character and would continue to serve as a destination for lower-impact recreational activities.

Proposed actions in Alternative 5 (Preferred) that would improve the visitor experience include:

- Significantly increase the campsite inventory in all river segments (+36%) and in Yosemite Valley (+37%).

Social trails through meadows can concentrate and channel water, leading to increased erosion. Restoration of natural contours, combined with boardwalks and/or trail rerouting, can increase access and improve meadow health.





The final plan calls for no new development in West Yosemite Valley. Public comment on the draft plan expressed concern about potential impacts of the proposed parking area and campground in West Yosemite Valley.

- Increase available lodging corridorwide (+3%) and in Yosemite Valley (+5%).
- Increase parking for Yosemite Valley day use (+8%).
- Expand access to additional sections of the river for private boats; limit commercial boating to reduce crowding.
- Expand picnicking and day-use opportunities at Yosemite Village, Church Bowl, and Happy Isles.
- Reduce traffic congestion and meet ecological restoration goals by making significant changes to the traffic circulation pattern and redesigning day-use parking areas.
- Manage user capacity for East Yosemite Valley by rerouting traffic at the El Capitan Traffic Diversion prior to reaching established limits.
- Provide shuttle service (seasonally available) to Yosemite Valley from a new El Portal remote parking area.
- Support additional regional transit service from Fresno to Yosemite Valley along Highway 41.

Resource Protection

All alternatives will protect and enhance river values, ensuring that the river and Yosemite National Park are “protected for the benefit and enjoyment of present and future generations.” Actions common to all alternatives will restore riparian areas, remove riverbank riprap, move camping and parking areas away from the river, restore meadow areas, and remove abandoned infrastructure in the river corridor.

The action alternatives explored in the *Final Merced River Plan/EIS* propose a range of development scenarios, with some proposing a substantial reduction in the development footprint and a corresponding increase in restoration. Alternative 5 (Preferred) focuses on essential riverbank restoration. The actions proposed under this alternative will protect the Merced River’s unique natural and cultural values through the restoration of 189 acres of riparian areas, mostly within 100 feet of the river. Restored riparian and meadow habitats will protect water quality, scenic views from the river, and traditionally used plant populations. Protection and enhancement of archeological sites and historic districts will provide future generations the opportunity to connect to Yosemite Valley’s rich history and heritage.

Actions under Alternative 5 (Preferred) that would protect river values include:

- Restore 189 acres of meadow and riparian habitat.
- Remove 6,048 linear feet of riprap.
- Reduce riverbank trampling and erosion by directing river access to resilient sandy beaches and sandbars; fence off sensitive riparian areas and restore native riparian vegetation.
- Remove or mitigate the effects of trails and roads through meadows by re-routing trails, adding culverts to improve hydrologic connectivity, fencing restoration areas, and constructing boardwalks.
- Ecologically restore portions of Backpackers

Camp, North Pines Campground, Lower Pines Campground, and the former Upper and Lower Campgrounds.

- Restore a 150-foot riparian buffer at Abbieville and Trailer Village.
- Protect culturally sensitive and riparian areas by removing 13 campsites at the Wawona Campground.

Response to Public Comment and Stakeholders

Alternative 5 (Preferred) contains a number of changes in response to public comments and consultation. Primary changes reflect public comment and stakeholder input regarding proposed West Valley development, the elimination of certain services from Yosemite Valley, and the loss of historic properties.

Responses to the Draft Environmental Impact Statement showed a strong preference for keeping West Yosemite Valley free of new development. In response, development previously proposed for this river segment has been eliminated in the final Alternative 5 (Preferred). The overflow parking lot proposed for West Yosemite Valley has been relocated to El Portal. The new campground proposed for Eagle Creek in West Valley has also been dropped from the preferred alternative. In response to strong support for increased camping opportunities in Yosemite Valley, additional campsites will be provided at Upper and Lower River Campgrounds.

A significant amount of public comment expressed opposition to the elimination of services like bicycle and raft rentals and swimming pools in Yosemite Valley. After further consideration, it was deter-

mined that bicycle and raft rentals could feasibly be located outside the river corridor. Swimming pools at the Ahwahnee Hotel and Yosemite Lodge will also be retained as part of the larger lodging facility.

Stakeholders expressed concern about the loss of historic properties in the draft Alternative 5 (Preferred). In response, changes have been made to Alternative 5 (Preferred) to better protect these resources. Proposed changes to Curry Village lodging have been refined to maintain a representative number of historic canvas tents in Boys Town. The historic foundations of 11 tent cabins will be retained at the Merced Lake High Sierra Camp. The historic Sugar Pine Bridge will be retained in the near-term; study of the bridge will help determine the final solution for mitigating any hydrologic impacts associated with it.

Collaboration

The *Final Merced River Plan/EIS* is the product of many years of scientific study, multi-agency and tribal collaboration, and the involvement of an enthusiastic public. The final plan has been deeply shaped by coordination and consultation with members of the public, traditionally associated American Indian tribes and groups, historic preservation experts, and other stakeholders. Many of the changes between the draft and final plan were the direct result of concerns raised during public meetings or consultation efforts. These activities have given the NPS a stronger plan that will improve visitor experience and better protect the Merced River's unique values for the next several decades.



Public comment informed every step in the planning process. The NPS hosted 54 public meetings and 12 webinars during the development of the plan.